DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 416 CE 072 753

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TITLE Pedagogical Implications of Postmodernism in Adult Literacy.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 24p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; *Critical Theory; Educational Sociology; *Feminism; Literacy Education; Sex Fairness; *Womens Education; Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Freire (Paulo); *Postmodernism

ABSTRACT

The literature on postmodernism and education agrees on postmodernism's central features. It emphasizes heterogeneity, difference, plurality, and the fragmentary. It is unified in its critique of the Enlightenment's positions--totality, unity, representational and objective concepts of knowledge and truth. The pedagogy of Paulo Freire intersects with feminist postmodern pedagogy since both are grounded in a vision of justice and empowerment and based on political identification with subordinate and oppressed groups. Despite this commonality, feminists who are influenced by postmodern thought are skeptical of Freire's critical pedagogy. They have developed a discourse that questions dialogue, empowerment, and student voice and assert that, although dialogue and empowerment are fundamental elements of critical pedagogies, they are difficult to obtain when groups have a heterogeneous composition. Postmodernism has turned attention to the construction of dominant discourses and the necessity of challenging them. Educators need to assist learners in contesting the image of the illiterate adult. Connected to this is the issue of representation and creating spaces for learners to enter the conversations from which they are so often excluded because they are "other." The tendency, even among critical educators, to deny diversity among learners must be overcome so that educators begin to look at what literacy means to women. (Contains 43 references.) (YLB)

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1993

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Pedagogical Implications of Postmodernism in Adult Literacy

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the pedagogical implications of postmodernism in adult literacy.[1] The paper begins with an introduction to postmodernism and its central features. This is followed by feminist postmodern criticisms of critical pedagogies with an emphasis on Freirian pedagogy, as it is the one usually associated with literacy. In the final section, the paper highlights three features of postmodernism and discusses how they should/could impact upon pedagogical practice.

Postmodernism

> A postmodern vocabulary and consciousness seems to be insinuating itself into popular as well as intellectual discourse. It must, however, be also said that delineating and defining the meaning of postmodernism is no easy task. Its meaning is at best elusive and, at worse, utterly incoherent (Shapiro, 1991, p. 112).
>
> The term "postmodernism" is a slippery event and its referents are saturated with overlapping significance (McLaren, 1991, p. 13).
>
> The one thing that does seem clear in these discussions is the lack of agreement on the meaning of "postmodernism" itself...Before we can proceed to a discussion of postmodernism and pedagogy, therefore, we must reconsider prior issues such as the meaning of postmodernism, its promise, and its risks and dangers (Whitson, 1991, p. 73).

[1] Note: I will use the terms adult literacy and adult basic education interchangeably. I usually use the latter term when talking of classroom practices and the former term when I am speaking more globally.

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The meaning of postmodernism is elusive because the nature of its central characteristics resist definition (Giroux, 1991; Kohli, 1991; Flax, 1990). However, within the body of literature on postmodernism and education, there appears to be some agreement on postmodernism's central features; it valorizes heterogeneity, difference, plurality and the fragmentary (Giroux, 1991; Kohli, 1991; Nicholson, 1991; Shapiro, 1991; Lather, 1988). As well, postmodernism is unified in its critique of the Enlightenment's positions; namely, totality, universality, unity, representational and objective concepts of knowledge and truth, and any concept of self or subjectivity which is not understood as produced as an effect of discursive practices (Giroux, 1991; Kohli, 1991; Flax, 1990; Weeden, 1987).

Although Flax (1990) emphasizes that postmodernism does not correspond to a unified discourse, she states that postmodernist discourses *are* unified in their identification of crucial subjects for our time. According to Flax, these subjects of conversations include:

> (1) contemporary Western culture - its nature and the best ways to understand it; (2) knowledge - what it is, who or what constructs and generates it, and its relations to power; (3) philosophy - its crisis and history, how both are to be understood, and how (if at all) it is to be practiced; (4) power - if, where, and how domination exists and is maintained and how and if it can be overcome; (5) subjectivity and the self - how our concepts and experiences of them have come to be and what, if anything, these do or can mean; and (6) difference - how to conceptualize, preserve or rescue it (Flax, p. 188).

Postmodernism is presented as a "slippery" discourse that resists definition. However, the literature indicates that as a subject, postmodernism embraces and critiques certain positions and concepts, all of which refer to the need for a different mode of thinking, a relational versus an objectifying or dialectical world view. The next section will take a closer look or, to use postmodern terminology, "deconstruct" some of its positions and concepts, anchoring them to literacy whenever possible.

According to postmodernists, the modernists' desire for unity is not beneficial because it functions to oppress and exclude individuals and to repress differences (Nicholson 1991; Ellsworth, 1989). Derrida, an influential writer associated with postmodernism, argues that attempts "to define a unified totality depend upon excluding elements judged to be impure from the purity of the essence, the metaphysics of presence always results in a distinction between what is inside the categorical boundary (presence) and what is outside (absence)" (Cited in Nicholson, 1991, p. 50). He argues that the metaphysics of presence leads to and generates the familiar dualities of Western thought such as male/female, reason/emotion and so forth. These dualities are hierarchical, as one pole of the duality is always designated as being superior to the other. Therefore, unity is achieved at the expense of the Other. Furthermore, it is argued that these dualisms are inadequate for understanding "a world of multiple causes and effects interacting in complex and nonlinear ways, all of which are rooted in a limitless array of historical and cultural specificities" (Lather, 1988, p. 576).

Literacy/illiteracy is an example of a hierarchical duality that has been created by the state's desire for unity. The construction of an "illiterate" population has been part of an "othering" process by the state and serves to create a national ideology of "illiteracy" which locates the blame for educational deficiencies in the individual, rather than in the structural inequalities within society. In the construction of the concept of "literacy", the state's first concern has been with statistics - - determining the numbers. In Canada, the ratio of one person with low-literacy skills to every seven literates is considered to be too high by the government, the business and labor sectors, and the media - - "it" constitutes a threat to the economy. The lines of battle have been demarcated through the use of statistics and the process of "othering" begins. I deliberately use the military metaphor "lines of battle" because this is the language used by the media and the government to create a battleground (a patriarchal dualistic logic) between "us" the literate society, and "them", the "illiterate"

others. This low-literate population is construed as the enemy and is depicted as an economic burden to society.

Postmodernists, while recognizing the need for common goals, argue for a "politics of difference" which notices, names, and respects difference, rather than a politics of unity that works towards sameness. Literacy, for instance, must be rewritten in terms that articulate difference with the principles of equality, justice and freedom rather than with those interests supportive of hierarchies, oppression, and exploitation (Mitchell & Weiler, 1991). As literacy workers, we need to be aware of discourses that omit differences and contradictory experiences of oppression. For instance, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator whose work has been fundamental to the development of critical approaches in literacy education, has excluded women in his analysis of what it means to be literate. Freire's emancipatory theory of literacy and his transformative pedagogy are built on an empowerment model that does not make distinctions between students based on gender and/or ethnicity. Although Freire promotes literacy for liberation, he does not address the gendered role of literacy, as he views class as the principal source of oppression. Within Freirian pedagogy, to reinforce difference rather than commonality would be disempowering (Lloyd, 1992). Of late, his pedagogy has been criticized because it does not include the specificity of women's needs (Lloyd, 1992; Weiler, 1991; Chledbowska, 1990; Rockhill, 1988).

Postmodernists dwell upon subjectivity and the self, arguing that we need to shift away from the romantic, modernist view of the self as unchanging and having a free, autonomous, universal sensibility to a view of the self as a "conjunction of diverse social practices produced and positioned socially, without an underlying essence" (Lather, 1988, p. 577). This leads us back to Flax's question about self and subjectivity: "How have our

concepts and experiences of them come to be?". Weeden (1987) offers a succinct response, which is worth repeating in its entirety:

> Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed. The assumption that subjectivity is constructed implies that it is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced. Subjectivity is produced in a whole range of discursive practices - economic, social and political- the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power. Language is not the expression of unique individuality; it constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific...subjectivity is neither unified nor fixed. Unlike humanism, which implies a conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject [postmodernism] theorizes subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict central to the process of political change and to preserving the status quo (p. 21).

According to Weeden, our subjectivities are socially constructed vis a vis language and discursive practices.

Postmodernists use the concept of discourse to speak of language and its reality-shaping powers; they discuss how language and its corresponding web of assumptions shape how we see ourselves and the world. Historically and socially defined discourses speak to each other through individuals. In other words, individuals do not speak and act but rather instantiate and give body to a discourse every time they speak and/or act (Mitchell & Weiler, 1991). Weeden (1987) concurs and explains that "to speak is to assume a subject position within discourse and to become subject to the power and regulation of the discourse" (p. 119). Thus, individuals carry discourses and ultimately change them through time.

In speaking of discourses, take literacy as a case in point. The language, assumptions, and meanings embedded within the messages disseminated by the public and private sectors and the media have created a dominant discourse of illiteracy. This discourse uses

terminology such as "motivation", "functionality", and "illiteracy" along with medical, military, and banking metaphors, all of which place the problem within an individual rather than providing an analysis of how social conditions contribute to low-literacy skills.[2] Within the field of adult basic education, educators give body to these discourses when, for instance, they engage in day-to-day conversations about "unmotivated" students who are not attending classes. Students are also swept up in the dominant discourse; a male student recently told me that being "illiterate" was like being blind. I recall feeling uncomfortable with his analogy because I felt as if I were listening to a rehearsed script that I had heard many times before.

Since discourses are inherently ideological, particularly those that are endorsed by bureaucratic processes and institutional frameworks, their foundations can only be located in power (Flax, 1990; Horsman, 1990). Yet discourses are not monolithic. According to Foucault (1980),

> "discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (p. 101).

So, although some discourses are more 'dominant' than others, they can be challenged and contested. In order to challenge the dominant discourse, we must hold in question even what we think we know through experience and develop critical self-reflexivity or the ability to see how our subjectivities are shaped through discursive formations and how we have come to know what we know (Weiler, 1991; Rockhill, 1991). As we participate in resistant discourses, we are part of a process of changing perceptions of experience, and forming new subjectivities. Educators and students need to "challenge and contest" the

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[2]For a comprehensive discussion on how language is used in literacy, see Ilsley, P.J. (1989). The language of adult literacy. Thresholds in Education, 15(4), 6-10.

dominant discourse and stop using constructs such as motivation as an explanation for poor school attendance or high attrition rates.

As well, postmodernists believe that one's knowledge is lodged in social relations and shaped by discursive formations. According to Lather (1988), "what we know is but a partial and incomplete representation of a more complex reality" (p. 576). This is because all knowledge is partial; it is framed through one's social location, one's life experience, history, and culture (Rockhill, 1991). The partial nature of knowledge means that we must be wary of universal theories and representational claims that purport that there is a truth to be represented. For instance, feminist analyses have been known to identify a unitary or universal mode of knowing for women, a concept that has been challenged by recent analyses of feminist theorists influenced by postmodernism (Weiler, 1991).

Luttrell's (1989) research adds substance to the postmodern claim that all knowledge is partial. She studied the educational experiences and perceptions of black and white working-class women who were attending two different adult basic education programs; she conducted in-depth interviews with 15 women from each program. One set of Luttrell's interviews led to an exploration of the women's concepts of intelligence and knowledge. The findings indicated that black and white working-class women do not have a *common* understanding of knowledge and gender identities. Black women, for instance, claim knowledge not only through gender, but through racial identity and relations. In discussing how race affects how women claim knowledge, Luttrell explains:

> Race is reflected in how the black women differentiated common sense from "real intelligence." First they did not make the same distinctions [as white women] between mental and manual ways of knowing or emphasize the intelligence required to do manual work perhaps because black men have historically had limited access to the "crafts." Instead, they viewed common sense, most often referred to as "motherwit," as encompassing everything from solving family disputes to overcoming natural disasters. Second,

> unlike white women, black women did claim "real intelligence" for themselves and their experiences in doing domestic, caretaking work. This "real intelligence" is based on their ability to work hard and get the material things they and their children need and want, with or without the support of a man (p. 41).

These women's perspectives challenge the notion that there is one universal mode of knowing for women. Instead, these women speak to complex gender, racial and class relations of power that shape how they think about knowing and learning.

Universal theories usually "subsume the particular history, struggles, voices, knowledge and sensibilities of those who are not privileged enough to enter into this kind of discourse" (Shapiro, p. 121). Kohli (1991) appreciates postmodernism because it reminds her that not all people are included in these universal theories and therefore she "must remember that [she] cannot speak unwarily for 'them'" (p. 42). Hooks (1990), who situates herself as one of the "them", states that "we fear those who speak about us, who do not speak to us and with us. We know what it is like to be silenced" (p. 152). Kohli and Hooks, like other postmodernists, emphasize the *who* as much as the *what* and the *why*. Some postmodernists even believe that *who* speaks is even more important than *what* is said (Lather, 1991). Within postmodernism, the term "representation" is widely used to call attention to the ways in which the "other" is positioned and represented by dominant sectors of society. Quite often, the "other" (as in the case of literacy) is presented as part of a dualistic framework in which they (the other) are the problem. Therefore, they (the other) are not invited into the conversation/dialogue and are represented by dominant groups who believe that they have the solution to the alleged problem.

With respect to the issue of representation, postmodernism moves beyond its usual theorizing into an active stance. In the conclusion of her article, Lather (1991) provides some concrete thoughts on the possibilities for post-critical intellectuals:

> To abandon crusading rhetoric and begin to think outside of a framework which sees the "other" as the problem for which they are the solution is to shift the role of critical intellectuals. This shift entails a move away from positions of either universalizing spokespeople for the disenfranchised or cultural workers who struggle against the barriers which prevent people from speaking for themselves. This postmodern repositioning of critical intellectuals has to do with struggling to decolonize the space of academic discourse that is accessed by our privilege, to open that space up in a way that contributes to the production of a politics of difference. Such a politics recognizes the paradox, complexity and complicity at work in our efforts to understand and change the world (pp. 107-108).

Lather is not alone in her thoughts; many postmodern writers speak of the need for the dominant sectors of society such as intellectuals, educators and researchers to open up spaces so that the "other" can position themselves and possibly transform these spaces (Hooks, 1992; McLaren, 1991; Kohli, 1991; Anzaldua, 1990).

Kit Yuen Quan (1990), a woman of color, who is not confident about her literacy skills has experienced what it is like to be silenced and positioned by others. She painfully describes what is feels like not to be heard because she does not speak the dominant language:

> I often felt beaten down by these kinds of attitudes while still thinking that my not being understood was the result of my inability to communicate rather than an unreceptive environment. A lot of times my language and the language of other working class, non-academic people become the target of scrutiny and criticism when others don't want to hear what we have to say (p. 215).

The dominant discourse of the "illiterate" as "other" serves to put the spotlight on the individual. Like Kit Yuen Quan, women assimilate society's belief that illiteracy is their problem and that they are responsible for their failures. They blame themselves. As women, we need to shift our gaze from the conductor. That is, we have to move beyond

looking at individuals to looking at the processes of production in order to see the discursive practices and how they are lodged in social relations.

This section has introduced some of the major tenets of postmodernism. The next section will explore the postmodern criticisms of critical pedagogies. Specifically, the "Freirian model" will be highlighted and critiqued, since it is the pedagogy usually associated with literacy.

The Freirian Pedagogy: A Description and Critique

In the early 1970s, the educational philosophy and pedagogy of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, became widely known as people began reading the English translations of his writings. In his publications, Freire denounces liberal and conservative approaches to literacy education, arguing that these ideologies subjugate literacy to the political and pedagogical imperatives of social conformity and domination. As well, these ideologies result in literacy programs that "reduce the process of reading, writing and thinking to alienating, mechanical techniques and reified social practices" (Giroux, 1983, p. 226). Specifically, Freire posits that the conservative discourse links literacy development to the economic interests of the state, while the liberal discourse views literacy development as an opportunity to help marginalized people fit into mainstream society. Freire offers instead a critical theory of literacy and a corresponding transformative pedagogy.

A major tenet of Freire's philosophy is that two inter related contexts are required for the adult literacy process to become an "act of knowing". First, Freire (1970a) postulates that "to be an act of knowing the adult literacy process demands among teachers and students a

[dialectical] relationship of authentic dialogue" (p. 212). Adult learning programs can be sites of *authentic dialogue* only when teachers and students are treated as equally knowing subjects who experience the "act of knowing" together. Second, authentic dialogue requires praxis (the dynamic of reflection and action) - - the critical analysis of students' lived experiences (reflection) followed by collective discussion on how to transform the oppressive elements of their lived experiences (action). Praxis, then, is a process whereby individuals collectively observe, interpret, and transform reality. This continual problemitization of their existing reality constitutes an "act of knowing" and leads to the conscientization of their experience(s).

Freire contends that individuals pass through levels of consciousness before attaining critical consciousness. In the initial stages of consciousness, the first, known as "semi-intransitive," and the second, named "naive transitivity", individuals move from being disengaged from the world around them to an over simplified engagement with and understanding of the problems in their world. The third and final stage, known as conscientization, refers to "the process in which men [sic], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality" (Freire, 1970b, p. 452).[3] In this stage of conscientization, students become empowered as they express their subjugated knowledge and begin to see themselves as authors and creators of their own world. In other words, individuals become empowered through the conscientization of the forces that control their lives: empowerment can lead to action.

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[3] Conscientization is sometimes referred to as 'critical consciousness.'

Freire acknowledged that his pedagogy must be reinvented and/or adapted to "fit" the North American context because it is "impossible to export or import practices and experiences" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 132). Freire's work in literacy was rooted in developing countries; the literacy campaigns he organized were carried out in the context of revolutionary social change. The specific historical, political, cultural, social and economic factors that mitigated these literacy campaigns do not exist in the North American context. Nonetheless, community-oriented literacy programs[4] have incorporated and modified aspects of his pedagogy, albeit realizing that this pedagogy will not lead to revolutionary social change.

Community-oriented literacy programs in Canada "struggle to find appropriate ways to use Freire's radical pedagogy with literacy learners" (Gaber-Katz & Watson, 1991, p. 48). These programs are concerned with social justice and with developing a pedagogy that questions inequality and works toward empowerment and social change. However, moving from rhetoric to reality is not an easy task, and educators have questioned how to achieve the goals of empowerment and social change. A pervasive theme that emerged in Gaber-Katz and Watson's study was that achieving social change and empowerment was a slow, gradual process. The following comments from literacy participants (paid literacy workers, volunteers and students) who participated in their study capture this notion:

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[4] A Canadian community-oriented literacy program contains three fundamental elements: (1) learner-centredness which enables students to define, shape and evaluate their goals and learning curriculum; (2) literacy from a critical perspective which is concerned with social justice and with creating an education program that will question inequality and facilitate social change and therefore, encourage students to think analytically about what they read and the world around; and finally (3) community-building which refers to collective action among people with common interests and concerns in building stronger communities (Gaber-Katz & Watson, 1991).

> I don't see empowerment as something that happens in a revolutionary way. I see it as being slow in Canada - something that sometimes moves very slowly and yet sometimes takes jumps.
>
> There are so many things that add up to a whole lot - little grains of sand, all moving to build the mountain (Gaber-Katz & Watson, 1991, pp. 124-125, 130-131).

Despite the difficulties and constraints that inhibit empowerment and social change in community-oriented programs, these programs still strive to create settings where people can simultaneously develop their literacy skills and analyze their lives from a critical perspective.

The Freirian pedagogy intersects with feminist postmodern pedagogy in that both are grounded in a vision of justice and empowerment and are based on political identification with subordinate and oppressed groups. Despite this commonality, feminists who are influenced by postmodern thought are skeptical of critical pedagogies such as Freire's (Weiler, 1991; Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1988; Rockhill, 1988). These postmodernists have developed a discourse that questions dialogue, empowerment, and student voice, concepts which are embedded within universal claims of liberation and social and political transformation.

Weiler (1991) situates Freire as a modernist and offers the following critique of his position(s):

> Freire sets out these goals of liberation and social and political transformation as universal claims, without exploring his own privileged position or existing conflicts among oppressed groups themselves. Writing from within a tradition of Western modernism, his theory rests on a belief of transcendent and universal truth. But feminist theory influenced by postmodernist thought and by the writings of women of color challenges the underlying assumptions of these universal claims. Feminist theorists in particular argue that it is essential to recognize, as Juliet Mitchell comments,

> that we cannot "live as human subjects without in some sense taking on a history." The recognition of our own histories means the necessity of articulating our own subjectivities and our own interests as we try to interpret and critique the social world. This stance rejects the universalizing tendency of much "malestream" thought, and insists on recognizing the power and privilege of who we are (p. 469).

Weiler is critical of Freire's pedagogy because it stresses unity, rather than incorporating a "politics of difference." Furthermore, she questions pedagogies in which the educator does not locate and examine his/her own privilege in relation to the student's.

As previously mentioned, the concepts of student voice, empowerment, and dialogue, all of which are central features of critical pedagogies, have been problematized by feminist postmodernists. According to Razack (1991), critical pedagogies that promote "empowerment, dialogue and voice do not in fact work as neatly as they are supposed to because there is no unity among the oppressed and because our various histories are not left at the door when we enter a classroom to critically reflect" (p. 7). Freire's concept of empowerment and dialogue is problematic because he viewed economic class as the principal source of oppression among individuals with low-literacy skills. He maintained that dialogue would be possible when teachers and students were treated as equally knowing subjects with common interests and goals. This rationalistic stance does not make room for the differences of privilege or oppression, meaning that it does not address the power dimension within which people are embedded. Postmodern feminists, on the other hand, assert that while dialogue and empowerment are fundamental elements of critical pedagogies, they are difficult to sustain/obtain when groups have a heterogeneous composition (Weiler, 1991; Razack, 1991; Lewis, 1990; Ellsworth, 1989; Lewis & Simon, 1986).

Differences in an individual's privilege and oppression in relation to the other members of a group influence his/her decision to enter into dialogue. Ellsworth (1989) states that

"What they/we say, to whom, in what context, depending on the energy they/we have for the struggle on a particular day, is the result of conscious and unconscious assessments of the power relations and safety of the situation" (p. 313). Ellsworth argues that before individuals decide to unleash their voice, they might well ask themselves, "Do I feel safe?" or "Do I trust the other members of the group?" or "What are this risks and costs of voicing my thoughts and feelings?". Her arguments are based upon classroom practice; she taught a university antiracist course which was attended by a diverse group of students, and found that it was difficult for students to engage in dialogue because of their diversity. In naming and acknowledging the difficulty of working across differences, she has been attacked by McLaren and Giroux, both of whom are prolific writers on the subject of critical pedagogy. Rather than commending Ellsworth for posing questions and raising provocative issues about dialogue, difference, voice, and empowerment, Giroux and McLaren accused Ellsworth of delegitimizing the work of critical educators (McLaren, 1988; Giroux, 1988). Interestingly, Giroux (1991) has moved away from attacking those who acknowledge the difficulty in working across differences, and now describes the feminist's questions about difference as a "healthy skepticism" (p. 40).

Implications

The final section will highlight three characteristics of postmodernism - - discourse, representation, and difference -- and discuss how they should/could impact the field of adult literacy.

Postmodernism has turned my attention towards the construction of dominant discourses and made me realize the necessity of challenging them. As previously mentioned, the media and the public and private sectors have constructed a national ideology of illiteracy based on the assumption that illiteracy is an individual problem, thereby causing adult basic education to be viewed as the nostrum to change individuals so that they will be able to

participate fully and productively in mainstream society. In my opinion, literacy educators need to create opportunities in and outside of the classroom for students to contest these discourses; the next paragraph describes how one educator created such an opportunity.

Recently, the Alberta Association for Adult Literacy (AAAL) disseminated at a conference a set of posters that contained negative captions such as "Did you know that one out of seven Albertans cannot read a medicine bottle?". Each poster, by focusing on what a person with low-literacy skills *could not do,* served to shape the public's perception about adults with low-literacy skills. Unfortunately, the majority of literacy workers in Alberta picked up these free posters and used them to advertise their programs, without thinking of the negative messages that the posters were conveying. However, one critical educator told me how she used the posters in her classroom; her students were given the opportunity to contest the message which was inscribed in the posters. I am not sure how far she took this exercise, but it could have been extended by having the students collectively write a letter to the AAAL stating their concerns about these posters, along with suggestions for future publicity.

Perhaps educators should be more aware of the need to create spaces in the classroom for students to contest the way in which the public and private sectors and the media portray the "illiterate" adult. For instance, a popular "image" is that which ties women with low-literacy skills to the private sphere. We see pictures of women who cannot read soup cans or children's medicine bottles. We hear about women who want to read to their children, help them with their homework, and write notes to their teachers. The gaze is focused upon the individual. I do not think that reading soup cans and medicine bottles will improve women's conditions and release them from their subjugated positions. Furthermore, these messages place a burden on women. When a woman receives messages about what she *should* be (i.e., a good mother who can read and write), she feels

inadequate. Educators need to assist students in challenging these images by asking questions as simple as "Is this an accurate representation?" and "How would you like to be represented?".

Postmodernism has precipitated my thinking and made me realize that the issue of having students and educators question dominant discourses needs to be more fully addressed in adult literacy. Connected to this thought is the issue of representation and creating spaces for students to enter into the conversation(s) from which they are so often excluded because they are "other". This raises a question: "What kinds of conversations should students be invited into?". My response would be "All conversations, including debates about policy at the governmental level; discussions about program planning and evaluation at the institutional level; discourse with provincial and national boards; and dialogues with intellectuals about what needs to be researched". Rockhill (1991) aptly summarizes my position in her statement:

> Chances are high that our students know more than their teachers about concrete aspects of their lives that are missing from or (mis)represented in dominant forms of discourse. Unless they can bring their experiences into the *classrooms* and we can truly learn to listen - to hear their stories-to learn what they know, that they know, and *how* they have come to know what they know, I don't see how we can talk of critical literacy (p. 23, my italics).

My only criticism of Rockhill's statement is its restrictive nature. She zooms in on the classroom and I think her lens should be wider to include more rooms, eg., board rooms, intellectual's offices, government offices, etc.

Finally, postmodernism has made me rethink my positions on unity and difference. Community-oriented literacy programs strive to follow Freire's pedagogy and create settings that move beyond the technocratic aspects of literacy acquisition. These programs

are attended by a group of students, diverse in their ethnicity, gender, and class. Yet, this diversity seldom, if ever, gets raised in or outside of the classroom by critical educators. Rockhill (1991) confirms this statement and states that "separate education for women in which a feminist agenda is the announced goal of the course is virtually unthinkable" (p. 4). The term "learner-centred" is frequently used by both critical and liberal educators; and although this term connotes a willingness to address differences such as ethnicity, class, and gender, the term has come to mean designing a *curriculum* to meet the needs of the generic, non-gendered, non-raced, non-classed student.

Why is there this tendency, even among critical educators, to deny diversity among students? On many occasions, I have heard male and female adult educators negate the possibility of gender-related issues within adult literacy with comments that go something like this: "What's the problem; there's an equal number of 'illiterate' men and women, isn't there?". Perhaps the statistics on rates of illiteracy act as blinders. If this is the case, then these blinders must be removed to make visible what is invisible in the statistics, or on a further note, to make public what is private.

Postmodernism serves to inform us that as educators, we need to step out of the patriarchal, authoritarian systems that decontextualize what literacy means to women by treating everybody as the "same" by beginning to look at what literacy does mean to women in their day-to-day lives so that a curriculum can be developed which meets and supports the specificity of women's stated needs and interests. I can resonate with Shakeshaft's statement that "the failure to integrate female experience into the general curriculum drives home the message that women and their experiences are somehow 'other'" (cited in Desjardins, 1989, p. 141). This argument can also be extended to ethnicity, and the failure to design curricula that reflect the specific interests and stated needs of students with different ethnic backgrounds.

Just how does one support the specificity of women's needs within a classroom which is filled with men and women? For instance, Ellsworth found that the classroom "was not a safe place for students to speak out or talk back about their experiences of oppression both inside and outside of the classroom" (p. 315). Ellsworth describes how her students formed informal affinity groups that met unofficially for the purpose of "articulating and refining positions based on shared oppressions, ideological analyses, or interests" (p. 317). With respect to literacy, I think that affinity groups might be a starting point for supporting women's needs. Although Ellsworth's students met "unofficially", I think that literacy educators probably need to have a stronger role in organizing and facilitating the development of affinity groups, because my experience has taught me that students with low-literacy skills usually do not have experience in organizing/facilitating simply because they have been denied these opportunities in the past.

It is important to note that that a "politics of difference" would also surface within women-only affinity groups because of differences in the women's ethnicity, class position, education, and so forth. For instance, the women would probably *not* have a common position on work, motherhood, and reproduction because of their respective differences. Nonetheless, affinity groups would provide an opportunity for women to share aspects of their lives, collectively explore and make sense of their experiences, and begin moving from the personal to the political. Female educators within developing countries who realize the possibilities and the limitations of Freire's pedagogy have already begun to form affinity groups. They are redefining Freire's "generative word process" to create a feminist pedagogy that addresses women's specificities and differences (Parjuli & Enslin, 1990; Schmidt, 1990; Moran and Hingston, 1990).

No Conclusion

My thinking in the area of postmodernism is still in the nascent stages. At times, I wonder if it is just an intellectual, elitist armchair exercise that provides a bit of a challenge to academics who are bored with their subject areas. My skepticism stems from the fact that only a handful of the writers on the topic of postmodernism actually seem towork with oppressed groups of people. With the exception of Lather, Ellsworth, and Razack, none of the writers integrate concrete examples of their actual practice into their writing, which leaves one wondering whether they could put their words into practice.

Nonetheless, I appreciate the possibilities that postmodernism offers. Primarily, postmodernism has radically altered my thinking with respect to the "politics of difference," representation, and the construction of subjectivities through language and discourse.

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